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Learning and the Creative Industries

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Nascent Entrepreneurship and Music Students

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Abstract

This trigger paper calls for a deeper theoretical connection to be made between core theories of entrepreneurship and our teaching of enterprise and professional development to arts students and suggests that it is the current disconnection between the two that has led to observable misunderstanding and hostility towards the term 'entrepreneurship' by many academic colleagues. As a test case, this paper looks at one theory of entrepreneurship that seems to most closely reflect the entrepreneurial 'state' of some music students, that of nascent entrepreneurship, and attempts in the spirit of qualitative study to 'make strange' key features of the theory by transposing them from their more natural home (small business start-up) to a university music department. This paper uses a music department as its case study but suggests generalisability to the wider community of arts students.

Introduction

As an academic developer working in the music department at Newcastle University and as a PhD student at Durham University I am a new visitor to the academic territory of entrepreneurship. Also a 'non-musician', I am aware of both my naivety and vulnerability in this field but also embrace the rare position I hold within my multiple roles: overtly as colleague, administrator, manager and researcher and covertly as participant observer and ethnographer. Manathunga (2006) – whilst herself acknowledging the limitations of the metaphor – uses post-colonial theory to suggest the inherent 'deconstructive power' within such development roles:

the liminal, hybrid, unhomely, in-between space in which [academic developers] operate could actually be particularly ripe

for deconstructing certainties and established paradigms and developing new 'hybrid' understandings of teaching and learning.

I agree with this and intend to exploit it.

This trigger paper calls for a deeper theoretical connection to be made between core theories of entrepreneurship and our teaching of enterprise and professional development to arts students, and suggests that it is the current disconnection between the two that has led to observable misunderstanding and hostility towards the term 'entrepreneurship' by many academic colleagues. As a test case, this paper looks at one theory of entrepreneurship that seems to most closely reflect the entrepreneurial 'state' of some music students, that of nascent entrepreneurship, and attempts in the spirit of qualitative study to 'make strange' key features of the theory by transposing them from their more natural home (small business start-up) to a university music department. This paper uses a music department as its case study but suggests generalisability to the wider community of arts students.

Enterprise and universities

Enterprise, the enterprise culture, cultural enterprise, student enterprise, entrepreneurship – these terms have become embedded in the discourse of the contemporary university where institutional pressure, driven on by funding imperatives, is brought to bear on departments to encourage them to engage with, foster and demonstrate a commitment to the development of entrepreneurial skills in their students (Erkkilä, 2000; Gibb, 1993). Meanwhile, whilst the entrepreneurship research community continues its 200-year-old quest to define entrepreneurship, there seems less unease about issues of definition once the term is transposed to the context of a university. Not only do universities seem to be very clear about what it is, urged on by the latest funding stream they are more happy to strategise it through the creation of designated posts and identified responsibilities (Deans of Enterprise) and the creation of enterprise centres, hatcheries and business development departments.

However, a sense of unease creeps in at departmental level.

A series of recent reports originating from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2006-08) advocate the need for entrepreneurial capacity building within the creative industries workforce. Hence, within universities, arts departments have moved to centre stage; targeted directly as potential new hubs of entrepreneurial development, they attract strategically allocated funding, however, this new relationship with enterprise initiatives can present both opportunities and dilemmas for staff and students.

To work within a diverse university music department is to be surrounded by embryonic ‘creative projects’, ‘initiatives’ and ‘developments’, which emerge from the core musical activities themselves and may go on to transform into certain types of identifiable entrepreneurial behaviour. Students find themselves in the enterprise spotlight. They provide attractive fodder for the advocates of cultural enterprise; they are seen to be enterprising by nature; and they are upheld as an example of taking enterprise to a new place. They thrive on ‘difference’, yet they are ‘not for profit’; they may be ‘community enterprises’ and actively distance themselves from the overtly commercial high-tech ‘spin-out’, at the same time exhibiting a natural disinclination to be seen as entrepreneurs. Music staff also find themselves navigating a new culturally ambiguous territory. For those who choose to engage with ‘enterprise’ there can be personal rewards: funding for a project, enhanced promotion, cash prizes, but there is an ever-present sense that this engagement may be inappropriate and somehow removed from core academic roles and responsibilities.

Nascent entrepreneurship

The discourse of enterprise takes many different forms; there is a vast literature, ranging over 200 years. The key theoretical positions are derived from the fields of economics, sociology and psychology but in the 1980s they started to connect with other phenomena as diverse as biorhythms and life cycle theory (Livesay, 1982), linguistics and discourse analysis (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005), ethnography (Down and Warren, 2007), critical and cultural theory (Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007) and pedagogy (Knights, 2008). It is a

‘profound and pervasive human activity that is of interest to many disciplines but is not encompassed by any one of them’ (Shapero and Sokol, 1982).

Within entrepreneurship theory towards the end of the 20th century, there emerged a new way of thinking based around the identification of that specific state within an individual whereby ‘entrepreneurial thinking has not yet expressed itself in a visible way’ (Johnson *et al.*, 2006): nascent entrepreneurship.

Nascent entrepreneurship by its very nature is hidden (Wagner, 2005). To be nascent – ‘in the act of being born, just beginning to be, not yet mature’ (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1964) – within the context of entrepreneurship is to be:

somebody who is, alone or with others, currently trying to start a new business; expect to be owners or part owners of the new firm, and have been active in trying to start the new firm in the past 12 months. (Johnson *et al.*, 2006)

Although the literature suggests many variants to this definition, the main agreed principle within entrepreneurship theory is that to be nascent an entrepreneurial activity has not yet reached the stage of a company making regular (more than three months) salary payments. A broader, applied definition is offered by Collins, Smith and Hannon (2006): ‘undergraduate students at an early stage of their entrepreneurial development’.

Offering us a way to conceptualise nascent entrepreneurship in the wider sense, Wagner (2005) uses the analogy of ‘biological creation’, four stages with three transitions, a theory aligned with evolutionary economics:

conception » gestation » infancy » adolescence

The overall theoretical underpinning of the concept of nascent entrepreneurship is in the main drawn from a combination of data from large scale surveys and questionnaires aimed at identifying entrepreneurial traits, for example Reynolds (2005), and two major

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data sets: the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics (PSED) and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), out of which the new concept of nascent entrepreneurship emerged.

Evidence from these primarily quantitative research projects has had major significance. It has directly informed government policy by identifying precise stimulants to nascent activity including:

- Regional location
- Visibility of role models
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Access to financial resources
- Possession of cultural capital
- The act of writing a business plan

This field of research (which is drawn from a conventionally agreed notion of ‘business’) seems to offer a possible new perspective on the nature of entrepreneurial activity amongst music students: first, by considering a music department in terms of the overarching theory of nascent entrepreneurship; and second, by setting observed activity against some of the factors identified above.

The theory and the students

If it is possible to set aside the distraction of business terminology, to forget about ‘the firm’ and make a conceptual step change to ‘project’ or ‘enterprise’, there exists some common space between a music student’s early entrepreneurial ventures and those of the more conventionally identified nascent entrepreneur. Students might talk about their creative idea; enter a period of development; start consulting with others on putting the idea on a more businesslike footing and possibly launch as a business.

On the Wagner continuum it is the transitions between phases that invite closer examination. The conception-gestation phase is observable in the form of various student projects, but there is less evidence of successful transition to the second phase ‘when the new venture either starts an operating business, or when the

nascent entrepreneurs abandon their effort and a stillborn happens’ (Wagner, 2005). If we accept that nascency sits in the space between gestation and infancy, is it possible, or even useful, to locate where music students sit in their early engagements with enterprise?

The large scale surveys fall short in this new location: the activities of music students do not fit naturally into the questionnaires typically used to identify nascent entrepreneurs where, finding there to be no suitable category offered, they may be forced to categorise their type of ‘business’ as ‘something else’, and as such become immediately ‘othered’ within the research process. There are, however, some clear parallels to be drawn between the factors identified in this research as conducive to nascent entrepreneurship and a ‘community’ of university music students.

The importance of role models and the act of writing a business plan clearly take centre stage in the delivery of enterprise education and for this reason I will ignore these and consider instead the significance of gender, ethnicity, cultural capital and region, major fields in entrepreneurship research, which remain to a large extent unacknowledged and under-theorised within enterprise education.

Music department as micro-region

Taking an anthropological approach, a music department can be viewed as a micro-region within which there exist territories, both physical (student spaces, different buildings) and intellectual (genres, instruments played). Within the music department at Newcastle University students have a new common room and the existence of this social workspace appears to have directly facilitated the emergence of some new entrepreneurial activity, most recently the setting up of a student music festival. This initiative, set up to include students from all year groups, directly resonates with Mueller’s work (2005), specifically in its intention to develop a spiral relationship between alumni, current and new students:

Regions with a high population of young and small firms could stimulate nascent entrepreneurship due to the existence of a large number of entrepreneurs. The owners of these firms act

as role models and are important in creating and sustaining an entrepreneurial climate. Individuals are embedded in their environment and consequently affected by friends, neighbours...

The next question to ask is, If the 'region' itself seems to be facilitating entrepreneurship, who are the students taking advantage of or choosing to engage with this? What are the influences of gender, ethnicity and cultural capital?

Gender and ethnicity

An inclusive recruitment policy has led to an extremely diverse student population within my department and whilst diversity does not necessarily imply a mixed ethnicity, there could be questions to be asked about differing nascent tendencies amongst different groups of students. In a comparative study of entrepreneurial activity amongst black and white Americans, Minniti (2005), whilst acknowledging the Weberian 'disadvantage theory', also challenges this with evidence that in the US self-employment rates amongst more privileged groups actually exceed those of disadvantaged groups. How might this privilege-versus-necessity continuum work amongst the students? Are there specific cultural groups of students operating outside the more familiar musical identity paradigm (linked to instrument of choice) who might be more or less likely to engage in entrepreneurial activity? Is activity linked to gender?

Within the department, students are able to bid for funds and support for entrepreneurial projects. Over the past two years, out of the 30 students who have sought funding and advice only two have been female, neither of whom followed through with proposed creative projects. This observation hints at issues concerning both gender and musical identity that resonate with one of the key findings on nascent entrepreneurship: that females with no role models and a fear of failure would have a low chance of enjoying entrepreneurship (Wagner, 2005).

Grilo and Thurik (2005) also address the entrepreneurial tendencies of women, and suggest two possible actions with which

to interrogate the processes at work, both of which could be applied to a music department:

Firstly, to act at the level of preferences by investigating and addressing the factors responsible for[...]lack of entrepreneurial drive. And secondly, to address more directly the obstacles faced by women that may be hindering the materialization of entrepreneurial spirit into actual entrepreneurship.

Cultural capital

The key features of cultural capital associated with nascent entrepreneurship are access to education and work experience, although within business and economics journals 'work experience' tends to be referred to as time served in real paid jobs, as opposed to the wider interpretation of this term within a higher education context. This relationship between cultural capital and nascent entrepreneurship is complex but potentially highly significant within universities:

Formal education, as a credential, can provide access to certain social networks (e.g. alumni network) or serve as a positive signal when nascent entrepreneurs are evaluated by resource providers (e.g. venture capital financing). However, the association between education and entrepreneurship is not necessarily straightforward. (Aldrich, 2005)

There have been many studies on financial support as a determinant of entrepreneurial engagement. Grilo and Thurik (2005) suggest that 'the perception of lack of financial support has no discriminative effect across the various levels of entrepreneurial engagement'. If we were to apply this as a hypothesis to a community of music students would the findings be similar to a growing feeling amongst careers advisers that only those students with more cultural and financial capital are likely to be able to take advantage of internships and work placement opportunities? Is it the case that entrepreneurial exploits are a luxury, more likely to be

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engaged in by those students who are more financially secure, who do not have to work during term time and who might have access to financial support from their families? Or as Aldrich (2005) suggests, could it be that 'At lower income levels, individuals may find the opportunity cost so low that they lose little or nothing by pursuing the uncertainties of income from a new venture?'

Conclusion/future research

The act of identifying and sampling selected theories of nascent entrepreneurship and then re-situating them within a music department suggests rich potential in terms of a methodology. Not only do the theories themselves help to provide alternative readings, the very act of theorising can be used to validate the concept of entrepreneurship and the validity of the entrepreneurship education offer. In a research-intensive department where all aspects of the curriculum are research led, maybe the time has come to apply the same rigour to our delivery of entrepreneurship education.

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